

ZEBRA

INSPIRED BY THE LIFE OF ATHOL WALLACE

Jill Wallace



**TSOTSI
PUBLICATIONS**

ZEBRA

by Jill Wallace

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NATURAL MIRACLE OR DISASTER?

Champagne Castle Hotel, 1960

PAPIN HAD the wings of seven hawks on his heels as euphoria flew him to the stables to check on Beauty.

He'd just had a heart to heart with Inkosi. The chief of the hotel always made time for Papin, though it was limited to a half dozen minutes at best. But today Inkosi took precious moments to open up a whole new world for Papin, igniting his elation.

Up till now, higher learning with books advanced enough to challenge him, as well as teaching kids at the hotel school, was just a pipe dream—as far as those pipes dreamed up for aqueducts in ancient Rome from Tsotsi's history book. But starting in the new year, Papin would be taught how to teach the younger kids at the hotel school. And the teacher would allow Papin to study Standards seven and eight in the same year, to fast-track his own education. He was indeed the luckiest Zulu since the dawn of time.

Beauty added to his joy as he stroked her lovingly. Just eleven months before, Tsotsi's beloved horse became pregnant

after her visit with Mr. Wright's stud, Brutus. A true thoroughbred and retired racehorse.

As Beauty's belly grew, Mr. Wright's vet came in to check her and declared she was bearing twins. He advised even though she carried two foals, there was the slimmest of slim chances both would be born alive.

Papin's heart had lurched, then burned. Living twins had never happened to his father or his father's father—both dedicated horsemen—in a century. But not even this wonderful horse could be expected to do the impossible.

The vet suggested Inkosi allow him to terminate one of the embryos to make the other stronger.

Papin sensed Inkosi was heavy with indecision when he caught him walking up and down the stable, deep in thought, for three nights in a row. On the fourth day, he saw a sight that brought his worlds together and made him dispel all the niggles Uncle had planted under Papin's skin about the great divide between white and black people of South Africa.

It was indeed a rare thing to see an educated white man and a Zulu medicine man throwing the bones together behind the chicken coop to determine the best course of maternal action for a horse.

He never told Tsotsi he'd seen this unique conferencing. It was Inkosi and Sangoma's tale to tell, and they never did. But Inkosi received his answer, because when Tsotsi came home from boarding school, Inkosi called them both into the stable.

"Look how Beauty's tummy is growing with her foal," Inkosi said, tenderness clutching at every few words.

Tsotsi's face split with glee as he hugged the neck of his beloved horse. "Yes, Dad. I bet it will be a colt. Can we call him Dennis?"

"Sure, we can. His mother will have no objection." Inkosi

smiled as he stroked Beauty and continued, "Mr. Wright's vet tells me she may be carrying twins."

"Oh, Dad, twins! Imagine. Papin and I can break them in together and ride them together. They need never be apart."

Papin's heart stopped for a couple of seconds. Oh! The disappointment that could follow.

"Whoa! Listen to me, Jock," said Inkosi as he leant down and looked deep into the eyes of his son. "The vet also told me the chances of her taking both foals to term is very slim. He reckons we should have him terminate one of them now."

"What does that mean?" Tsotsi asked.

"He thinks it's best to stop one of the eggs from growing early, before it becomes a foal, so the other one can grow properly."

"Oh, *no*, Dad," the boy pleaded, "don't do that. Give Beauty a chance. She'd never disappoint us. She'll have two foals just to please you. Imagine, you'll have *two* new horses for the guests. That's just how she is."

Papin used his eyes to plead with Inkosi ... *Please be cautious with our boy's Beauty.*

"Well, it's a risk. Make no mistake. We could hurt Beauty by making the decision to keep both embryos, and we don't want that. We don't want to deprive one foal so the other can flourish, either. But we can't see inside her tummy to see what's going on. She'll need more help than we can give her, even with Sponon and Papin's great knowledge. The vet bills will cost us a fortune ..." Papin could feel Inkosi's stress.

Tsotsi's face contorted with the dilemma as if it was his choice to determine.

"I've talked to some very knowledgeable people," Inkosi said, and Papin recalled the two men he admired most, conferring over the bones, "and I think we should see how she does. Be prepared. If she isn't doing well, we'll have to terminate the

other foal no matter how many months along she might be. Beauty comes first.”

Tsotsi jumped with joy. Papin felt like jumping too. Beauty was Inkosi’s priority.

Just that morning, he’d been shining up the glasses in the bar storeroom while Tsotsi was with his mother in the gift shop, when a local farmer popped into the bar for a drink after an errand. Inkosi and Bekah were preparing for the pre-lunch rush.

Papin was hidden by the one-way mirror.

“You’ll lose your guests, man. South Africans can’t stand seeing black and white so close together. You know they all call your boy and that Zulu ‘Zebra’ because the black and white are on top of each other all the time,” said the farmer, his tone forcing an argument.

Inkosi never even lifted his eyes from the tots of whiskey he was counting. He just said softly, “Ah, ‘Zebra.’ It’s the black that makes the white shine brighter and the white that gives the black emphasis and depth. The collective noun for zebra is ‘dazzle.’” Inkosi wrote down the number of tots remaining in the Johnny Walker bottle, then looked into the eyes of the farmer. “If their colors are too dazzling for you, sir, well ... just look away, or find a different bar to drink in.”

Inkosi waited for a response. None came.

“So, what would be your pleasure? The usual?”

The farmer nodded. Papin marveled at his hero—Inkosi’s composure and his quick response. Then it hit Papin. His boss’s response was a sure sign of great practice. He would bet this topic came up more than he would ever know. He wouldn’t tell Tsotsi. This was something a man kept to himself.

Papin was amused by Tsotsi’s warped concept of time as far as Beauty was concerned. She certainly looked fit to burst very early. From her ninth month, the younger lived in fear he’d miss the birth while away at boarding school. Papin supposed an

eleven-month pregnancy to a going-on-ten-year-old was longer than a shoelace of licorice to a sugar ant.

Every few weeks, the vet would appear and listen with his stethoscope to Beauty's heartbeat and try to locate any others. He heard one strong heartbeat consistently. The other, slight to begin with, became hard to find. Without fancy testing, which Inkosi did not want to put Beauty through nor could afford, two heartbeats were never conclusive throughout her pregnancy.

Papin spent many nights talking to Beauty while Tsotsi was at school, asking her to tell him if she needed him to talk to Inkosi. But she never talked back. Papin believed it was a good sign. She seemed calm.

In Beauty's seventh month, his school's teacher had leant Papin some of her own books on philosophy, which had pulled him away from his ancestors and into new worlds. He immediately made amends and begged the wise dead for Beauty's health and Tsotsi's presence at the birth. He couldn't afford any malice or resentment from up there at a time like this.

Papin prepared himself to take in every single second so he could reenact the mammoth event and share it a thousand times, as was their custom when the younger missed a happening. No experience in either of their lives had ever been more important.

As her eleventh month approached, Tsotsi tried every trick in the book to keep from going back to boarding school. Blotting paper under the tongue to make him faint before his mother drove him down the mountain didn't work, nor did pleading and begging. The boy only came home ever second weekend. His chances of catching the birth were so very slim.

Beauty's stable was lined with fresh hay and readied for her long before she needed it. Papin's young horse boy was excelling, and Papin was relieved of all the shit jobs. Literally.

Finally, it was time. Beauty started pacing on Thursday

night. Tsotsi was due home late Friday. Papin put in a request for a consultation with Sangoma. It wasn't a simple matter. No! Such a message could only be dispatched via the chief of the kraal, who sent an induna—one of his teenage sons—to find Sangoma and beg an audience.

When Sangoma came, it was only after breakfast on Friday.

"Please, Sangoma. Make her slow down. Tsotsi has lived for nothing but this moment. It dare not come sooner than he can get here. My storytelling skills are good but not as good as living this miracle. Even if the second foal is dead, one being born from the horse he loves so much—well, not even the greatest storyteller can make that come to life. Make the ancestors understand the importance of holding back for my young friend, please."

Sangoma quickly lapsed into ancestor-communication mode, and Papin swore the horse's agitation waned. Beauty allowed Papin to scratch her long nose for an hour.

Panic surged through Papin. What were the chances of one foal *and* Beauty staying healthy when she had to muster the stamina to eject a stillborn foal as well? His blood ran cold, and he shivered.

It was a rare opportunity to witness the birth of a foal, let alone the vague chance of twins, and a couple of local farmers and a host of excited guests began gathering outside the stable. Mr. Wright, the stud's owner, was among them. Five past eleven.

Jock would be coming up the S-bend in six hours.

Six long, long hours.

He couldn't quite remember what he'd promised the ancestors if they held back the birth. He thought it might include that he and Tsotsi stop stealing peaches. He'd try and renegotiate after the birth.

Two hours later, peaches were the least of what he'd pay for Beauty's safety and just one healthy foal. And if they would—in

their most esteemed wisdom—allow Beauty to wait until Tsotsi was there to deliver the live foal ... well, he'd go without sitting on their rock for a whole two months. It would be torture, but he would endure it.

The expensive vet arrived with gloves up to his shoulder and a box of tricks at 12:05 p.m. Papin couldn't help but feel resentment. This white man, a vet, on his turf. Who could know more about horses than Papin's father, Sponon, and himself? The white ways were sometimes a mystery, but he conceded the more attention Beauty had, the better for her.

Beauty became excessively agitated.

He couldn't help himself. "Sir?" Unable to make himself say "doctor," Papin pleaded. "Please help Beauty hang on for as long as she can so her young master can witness this birth."

"You're a horse boy. You should know better. The mare is what matters. She is already being pushed close to the edge of her endurance. There is no way we will give her more distress by delaying the process." The vet's tone was harsh.

Papin hung his head and felt shame burn his face. His love for Tsotsi had prompted an asinine question in front of a man he felt he had no use for.

His face kept aflame as shame turned to anger when the vet pushed and prodded at Beauty's bulging, sweating belly more than Papin felt necessary. *He's forcing this to happen sooner than it should. Let nature take her course.*

He glanced at the stable clock designed to keep the morning and afternoon guest rides on strict schedules.

Twenty-eight minutes past twelve. Time went by so slowly, and if that man pushed on Beauty's bulging stomach once more ...

Beauty was restless. She lay down, and her urine and manure seeped out without warning. Good training for his young horse boy.

1:02 p.m. *No! No! No! Beauty, get up!*
Good girl!

And then, at one forty-one, she was down again for a while. Up and down, up and down.

The animal doctor grinned when Inkosi's head appeared above the stall door. "She's getting ready," said the vet, like he was entirely responsible.

"Any inkling as to whether we have one or two live ones inside there?" asked Inkosi.

"There's a hell of a lot of movement in there, but I only hear one heartbeat. It's highly unlikely the other one will make it. I hope your son's not disappointed."

"He'll just be glad Beauty's safe. One foal would be a bonus," said Inkosi.

Beauty's tummy was stretched and looked fit to burst. She lay down and stayed there, and it was obvious her stomach was contracting in birth preparation.

It was 2:55 p.m. *Just two more hours, Beauty. Wait for him, please, girl, please.* He didn't care that the vet gave him a filthy look when he moved to her head. Beauty needed him. He'd glanced at Inkosi, who nodded ever so slightly as he smiled, so Papin sat on the hay next to her.

He whispered horse love words and stroked her wet neck. "Wait for him, Beauty," Papin whispered. "He needs to see your baby born. But please, don't wait if it will hurt you. Nobody wants you to hurt yourself. Tsotsi will understand if you have to push your only living baby out. It must be tight in there."

She got up again, and Papin thanked her profusely and concentrated hard to offer up humble thanks to the ancestors.

By four fifteen, she was down again, and her contractions were closer and closer together. As much as he wanted to, Papin could no longer wish waiting upon her. She needed to do what she needed to do to stop the stress on her body. "It's okay, girl.

Let it come. Tsotsi will understand. Let it come, Beauty. It's all right."

And she did. With a great push, a whitish membrane peeped from her rear.

"Here it comes," said the vet excitedly, as if he was doing the pushing.

Though many heads gazed over the stable half door, it was quiet as the mountains before a storm.

Instinct forced Papin on his haunches to leap to where the baby was pushing to get out, but his own father's warning stare from the corner of the stable stopped him in his tracks.

The vet pulled slowly and firmly on the protruding hoofs, and a pair of front knees emerged, protecting a head between them. Vet was quick to break the membrane, and the face of a beautiful brown foal emerged. After a few seconds, its nose lifted, and it took its first breath.

As the gasps from above the stable door subsided, Papin glanced at the clock. Fourteen minutes past five. *Gollaga-inja*. He'd posted one of the youngsters where Mrs. Inkosi parked her car. He was to run Tsotsi back to the stables without delay.

And then the rest of the foal slid out, swaddled in nature's slick coating.

"A colt," whispered the vet loudly as he broke open the membrane covering the rest of the foal.

Though Papin felt he could have done the job without the expensive price tag, he had to admit the guy was very thorough in his checking to see every inch of the young horse was in good shape, and then he concentrated his instruments on Beauty.

"He's a handsome devil," Inkosi said quietly to Sponon from behind the stall door, and Mr. Wright joined him. Papin grinned when he caught his father and his boss's eye.

Just then, Inkosi's face changed to sadness. "Wish to good-

ness that little bugger could have witnessed this,” he said, and Papin felt just the same. If only.

Papin was in fact getting a little annoyed at the ancestors because it wouldn't be kind to let Tsotsi witness a dead foal rejected from its mother's body. He contemplated asking them to reverse his request for a time delay.

“We must see the dead foal before the placenta, otherwise Mama's in trouble,” the vet warned quietly as he massaged Beauty's belly.

Beauty began her contractions again, and it scared them all, even Papin's horse-sure father and the vet. Her spasms were violent, as if she was really pushing to rid herself of that which her body had no use for. Papin really started to beg. “Please look after Beauty. Please, please look after Beauty. I'll do anything.”

And he was just thinking about more sacrifices he could offer up when the newborn colt suddenly struggled to his wobbly feet. It was a breathtaking moment marred only by Tsotsi not being able to see it. But his legs quickly folded, and he went down, looking confused.

Beauty was resting before her next bout of pushes. She was the most obliging horse. She wanted them all to enjoy her colt before she once more needed their attention.

The colt gamely tried to stand on his spindly legs. Nearly ... nearly ... and another huge effort, and he was standing.

Papin was torn between the colt's first steps and Beauty's distress, which had restarted.

“Go to him, Papin.” It was Inkosi's voice. He couldn't believe he was allowed the privilege.

Next to the colt, Papin made soft clicking noises. The little one looked vaguely in his direction. Papin felt a deep sense of love for this newborn as he stroked the long nose before the young legs collapsed again.

“Papin!”

The shout was Tsotsi's from a distance. He wanted to shout back but didn't want to upset the newborn, but Inkosi did it for him. "In here, Jock, quickly."

Inkosi opened the stall for his son, who looked at the colt. A beam as big as the moon in its first quarter spread across his face. "Beauty," he said quietly, "your baby is tall and strong." He gently stroked the foal, then at once went to sit next to Beauty's head. He kissed the side of her nose. "You did it, my girl. You're so clever."

Papin felt his heart contract as he watched boy and horse together.

"Papin? Where's the other one?" Tsotsi asked.

Papin was lost for words. He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders at the same time, and the vet said, "We don't know yet, son." He spoke softly, as they all did, to keep a calm environment for the birth. "She's contracting again, but I don't know if it's a stillborn or just a placenta."

"Oh, my Beauty, don't feel bad. It's okay. You did your best. You tried your hardest. We know. One is perfect. One is perfect," Tsotsi said as he stroked and soothed the horse.

Papin allowed himself a moment of pride, like a father witnessing an act of kindness performed by his child.

Papin moved to Beauty's udder and expressed her milk into a waiting bowl. He filled a syringe and handed it to Tsotsi, then Papin coaxed the foal closer to his mother's head. "You feed him. He's thirsty after his big push. He tried waiting for you," Papin said and smiled.

Tsotsi gently forced the tip of the syringe between the colt's tightly clamped gums.

"Okay, here comes something," said the vet.

Fear gripped Papin. Tsotsi should not see what was coming.

"You look after him, Tsotsi. Watch him. He is so precious," and as he spoke, Papin positioned his own body to shield Tsotsi's

view so the boy would be able to concentrate on the new, vital foal.

Papin and his heavy heart watched for the release of the dead one, all the while stroking Beauty's neck, her nose, whispering to her.

The hooves in their yellowish membrane were forced out ... and then out came the head, protected between the knees.

The vet tore open the sheath, and they all held their breath in hope, but there was no sign of life.

Papin urged softly: "Keep feeding the colt, Tsotsi. Watch him carefully."

And then, the newest foal moved its head—just a fraction.

Papin felt a surge of hope but then dismissed it. It could have been a nudge from his mother's leg.

Then it happened again. A small gulp of air. It was so unexpected. So contrary to all odds, both the vet and Papin jumped, and in a split second, the vet went to check the foal's vitals as Papin moved out of the way for Tsotsi to get closer to the newborn. "Come quickly. It's breathing," Papin whispered to Tsotsi.

In a flash, the younger was next to the newest foal. "Look, Tsotsi, look. See how it moves its head. This is his third breath."

Papin went to the colt who needed attention and quickly gave the newborn another syringe of his mother's milk and made horse words that would encourage Beauty. He glanced up to the stable rafters. "Please do not let it die now, not after you've given the young one hope." And as if on cue, the rest of the thin body plopped out of its mother's womb.

The vet handed Papin another syringe, and he filled it and passed it to Tsotsi before he returned to nursing the colt.

"So weak." The vet shook his head.

Please don't let it die. Please don't let it die. The words helped keep Papin's panic hidden from his young friend.

He knew what was happening purely by Tsotsi's expressions. He wished he could be in two places at once, but the vet showed the younger how to gently feed the weak foal. The vet was right. Feeding might save it.

The vet pulled the rest of the membrane off the new foal's hindquarters, and he glanced at Papin, who joined him to help move the new one out of the way so Beauty could expel her placenta. It plopped out a minute later, just missing the hind legs of the weak one.

"He's a she," shouted Tsotsi, and all sorts of happy sounds came from the other side of the stall.

Papin looked to see how Beauty was doing. She was standing and her colt happily nursing. His heart was fit to explode.

"Beauty's doing exceptionally well," said the vet, glancing up at Inkosi, then to Papin. "We must get this baby girl up quickly. Standing will help her gain strength. Let's get her legs moving."

Vet took the front legs and Papin the hind ones, and they gently helped loosen her limbs. Papin started to beg again: *Please don't let her be lame. Please don't let her be lame ...*

Folding. Unfolding. Folding. Then, as they watched the weak one's ribs move up and down in short staccato breaths, miraculously the long legs began moving on their own.

Tsotsi's face was glowing with joy.

"Give her as much milk as she'll take, Tsotsi," Papin instructed.

Halfway through that vial of milk, the vet gestured to Papin, and they helped the young horse to her feet and held her there even though her legs were wobbly, then gently let her down.

"Let's give her a minute. Let's see if she'll try on her own. If she does, we'll know she'll survive."

One could hear a piece of straw rustle in the tense silence. Tsotsi ever so gently nuzzled her neck and stroked her long nose, but Papin motioned for him to let her be.

The first time she tried, she was just too weak. Papin could see Tsotsi ache to help her.

She tried again, then miraculously stood up for a second or two, long enough for all to see she could, before she flopped back down.

The now large audience hanging over Beauty's stall cheered and hooted.

Mr. Wright received pats on his back on behalf of his own clever stud, Brutus.

Beauty rose to the applause and nuzzled her firstborn, who was still standing.

The wobbly filly tried gamely to stand again and succeeded! Papin helped Tsotsi guide her toward her mother.

Papin felt his heart go soft as he watched the boy's gentleness, and gratitude coursed through his body. He'd deal with all he'd promised the ancestors later.

Tsotsi's face was filled with light and love as he said, "Look, Papin. She has a white arrow starting at her forehead, going all the way down between her eyes."

Sure enough, it was the only white part on her delicate but perfect brown body.

After mother and babies received shots from the vet and the elated crowd moved to the veranda, cigars and whiskey were called for in celebration of The Champagne Castle Miracle.

Only Inkosi, Tsotsi, Papin and his father, Sponon, remained with the horses.

"Jock, there is only one colt," Inkosi said. "I know you've had a name for him for some time. Remind me again?"

"Dennis, like Dennis the Menace in the Sunday comics." Tsotsi paused, then tilted his head. "Do you mean I can really have one of them, Dad? For my very own?" It was the first time the boy had glanced up from tending the weak foal. A true doting father. Papin's heart smiled first, then his mouth followed.

“Yes. Of course. He will stay here, and yes, sometimes the guests may have to ride him, but he is yours to worry about, love, take care of, and break in.”

“Gee, Dad. You don’t think Beauty would be upset?”

“By the time the young one is old enough to be ridden, she’ll be relieved to have some peace from you riding her.” Inkosi looked tenderly at his son.

“Can this one be mine, please, Dad?” he asked, stroking the skinny neck of the weak filly.

“And her name?” Inkosi asked.

“Same. Dennis,” Tsotsi said matter-of-factly.

“But that’s not a girl’s name.” Inkosi smiled.

“It’s *my* girl’s name,” said Tsotsi. “Dennis.” He was pleased with the sound.

“And your horse’s name, Papin?” Inkosi asked him.

“I don’t have a horse, Inkosi.” He felt he should apologize for some reason.

“You got one this morning, Papin. A colt.”

Papin’s world stopped for a long second as the enormity of this gift penetrated his brain.

He felt his finger point to his own chest as he gazed in earnest at Inkosi, lest he’d misheard.

“What is your new colt’s name, Papin?” Inkosi asked again, smiling.

He thought he was dreaming. A horse to call his own? Inkosi was giving him the exact same gift as he gave to his only son.

“Oh, Inkosi.” He was struggling with getting words out. “Shaka. Shaka is the name of a king.”

“And so,” Inkosi said, his smile as broad as Papin had ever seen it, “World, may I present to you Shaka and Dennis. These boys will be responsible for looking after their own two natural wonders of the world. They pledge to groom them and break them, feed them, and most of all love them, and if they don’t

look after them, I shall take them back. Right, boys?" He looked at them both, and he watched Tsotsi's vigorous nod mirror his own.

It was the second time in Papin's life he'd cried. His first tears were caused by pain and loneliness in a self-made hut with the heads of army ants clamped on his penis. This time the tears came with overwhelming surprise, humility, deep gratitude and the unbridled joy of ownership. It was the first anything Papin had ever owned.

Because of his promise not to sit on the rock for two months, he and Tsotsi spent most of their time together with their new horses in the stable or out in the field.

Uncle came to visit from the city for a night, and Papin found an empty bed in the compound to avoid the kraal. His heart was thick with gratitude for this life. *His life*. He didn't want to be plagued by unsettling things in a fractured world he'd never seen. He would not think about hungry people without sanitation being exploited by greed. He would not dream of innocents being shot for simply asking for fair treatment. He covered his ears to shield them from Uncle's forceful way of making him feel he could one day make a difference on behalf of a nation.

He would block it all out because he had his best friend Tsotsi. His Hotel-Inkosi. And now his horse, Shaka.

He forced himself to consider his uncle a slow-creeping sac spider, appearing mostly at night with two pairs of legs going forward and two pairs going backward. When he sank his spider-fangs into you, it didn't hurt much and you'd no idea you'd been poisoned. Next morning, you'd see the bite marks. A day later a half-inch lesion would swell and ulcerate for four weeks. Unbearable pain and an oozing, ulcerating wound might eventually ease in a month, but the scar could remain for ten or more years.

How long had Uncle-Sac-Spider's deep bite been festering in

Papin's bloodstream? It would take a decade for his damaged tissue to heal.

As much as he knew every creature on earth had a purpose, he mentally positioned his fighting stick tip above the spider's black head and brought it down hard. He ground his imaginary stick into the split spider-head to ensure its demise, then turned away as eight randomly moving legs took their last ungainly step to nowhere.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jill Wallace is a storyteller. Born and bred in South Africa, she's lived half her life in America. Just as it's hard to tell the roots from the branches of a baobab tree, Jill no longer knows where the South African ends and the American begins. She married her prince, helped raise two heart-children and lives too far from her granddaughters. Jill writes happily from the backyard of their home in the Space Coast of Florida, which she shares with her husband and two charming and delightful Aussie Shepherds. She believes in loyalty, dogs, kindness, dogs, long friendships, dogs, as well as the *great* power of chocolate and imagination. In any order.



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