

Like Ripening Fruit

By Clive Gill

Simon Chakamanga, a broad-faced man, knocked on the door of his friend's room in an African township in Bulawayo, a city in the British colony of Southern Rhodesia, in the year 1964. No sound was heard from inside the tiny room attached to the end of the low-roof building where migrant men slept.

Simon knocked again.

"What? Who's there?" a man asked loudly.

"Simon. Wake up."

"Wait... I'm coming."

Josh, a small man with a narrow mustache opened the door and squinted from the bright sunlight.

"Why do you come so early?"

"My hunger wakes me. Let me in."

Josh and Simon shook hands, shook thumbs and shook hands again with loose grips. Simon walked into the small, dark room and stood with his hands in his trouser pockets. He watched Josh sit in his underwear on a thin mattress and scratch his head, then jerk a steel comb through his black, tightly-coiled hair. Patiently he waited for his friend to escape from his sleep.

"Food must come to us today, Josh."

"How? From where?"

Josh's eyes wandered from Simon's long trousers and short-sleeve shirt that covered a large frame, to his darting, angry eyes. Josh yawned and stretched his arms. "We have no job, no money."

"Your brother has a job."

Josh shook his head from side to side. "My brother cannot help us."

"Trouble will come if he won't help. Why does he not help us?"

"This is what happened, Simon. His friend came to the store where he was working. Behind some tall shelves, where the owners could not see them, my brother showed his friend many shirts."

"And...?"

"The friend tried on some nice, new shirts and wore one on top of the other. After that he put on his old shirt and his jacket."

Simon turned his head to one side. "And walked out the store without paying?"

Josh smiled. "He paid. But only for a cheap pair of socks."

Simon threw his head back and laughed. "A clever man," he laughed again with tears of enjoyment. "A good story. We can trust your brother and his friend to make a plan to sell the shirts for us to get food and beer ... and to give us money for our families at our village. But what is this about your brother not helping us?"

Josh sat in silence.

Simon's face grew serious. "What happened?"

"The police heard about it."

"How did they find out?"

Josh stood with lowered eyelids, hesitating. "An informer told them."

"Bloody skellum!" Simon's lips stiffened as he described a scoundrel. He paced the cramped room.

Josh whispered, "Lower your voice. The walls are thin and ears are everywhere."

With burning eyes Simon listened to the sound of a passing vehicle on the dirt road, then stepped close to Josh and whispered, "Those bloody informers are vermin of the earth. What proof do the police have against your brother?"

Josh sat and sank into his bed. "They came at night to his room."

"And?"

"They found many new clothes from the store where he worked. The jail is holding my brother and his friend."

"So... they can't help us," Simon blurted, rubbing his tongue over dry lips. "I'm helluva thirsty."

He walked outside to a faucet, drank water, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. As he watched people walk or ride their bicycles to jobs in the town center, jealousy gnawed at his thoughts. Returning to Josh's room, he sat on the end of Josh's bed and stared at his old tennis shoes, laced with string and with his left foot's small toe protruding.

Josh stated, "We know food is plentiful in the White suburbs."

Simon sat upright. "Let's go there. Today!"

"And do what?"

Watching his friend's eyes as they stared beyond the bare walls, Josh allowed Simon time to think. And he watched the changing expressions on Simon's face, as Simon's mind wandered.

Simon's eyes focused on Josh. "Well... I think I have a way. Listen. We find a house where the Whites have gone out. And we talk to the cook about helping us."

"I don't know," Josh responded. "Anyway, we can try. Let's get out of this room." He reached for a

few rumpled clothes lying on top of an empty wooden crate. "Simon, invite some friends to go with us."

Josh dressed quickly, then walked outside to the communal bathroom as Simon gathered three friends from nearby rooms, who each brought a knobkerrie, a short wooden stick carved to form a heavy knob at one end. Before a clear sky delivered the sun's intense heat, the friends walked to an affluent suburb. Each hid their nervousness.

Carefully trimmed lawns grew in front of clean-swept verandahs and the smell of frying breakfast bacon intensified their hunger.

"They have place to grow mealies," a barefoot man explained about growing corn.

"And fruit," added a man with torn clothes. "I see many avocados on the trees."

"Here's a house with no cars outside," announced Simon.

Josh led them to the back of the single-story, three-bedroom house with a green, corrugated iron roof, where they saw an African servant cleaning carrots in the scullery sink.

"Greetings," Josh said.

Wiping his hands on a stained apron, the gray-haired servant came to the door. "Greetings. I hope you go well."

Josh saw uneasiness in the man's eyes. "What's your job?"

The servant hesitated. "I am cook."

"Cook," Simon repeated and stroked his chin. "Tell me, are you a good cook?"

The servant feigned a smile. "I am a good cook."

"We want to believe you. Let us taste your food," Simon requested.

The wrinkle-faced cook trembled and his voice squeaked. "I am sorry. I cannot."

A young African nanny heard the conversation from inside the house. She came to stand behind the cook while she observed the men.

In anger, Simon ordered, "Give us bread."

A dog barked in a neighbor's yard. In the dust of a coop, chickens scratched and clucked.

The cook and the nanny's frightened eyes shifted from man to man.

The nanny tightly knitted her eyebrows as she stood at the cook's side and cried, "The White woman will sack us if we give food away."

Simon stepped forward. "When we see you in the township we'll crack your heads open."

The nanny held her head with both hands and screamed in a shrill voice. "You are hooligans!"

"Get away from here!" the cook ordered.

The group stood without moving. Then, Simon turned and walked away, followed by the other men. "Our knobkerries are waiting for you," the barefoot man called back.

They walked onto a tarred road where tall wooden utility poles at the roadside supported overhead power lines to homes and to street lights.

"The servants must fear us," Simon stated.

"Yes they must... and more than they fear the Whites," added Josh.

"Or, we'll be hungry all day," said the man with torn clothes.

Around a small bend in the street 200 yards ahead, they saw a small European boy, in khaki shorts and shirt, cross an intersection, where a tall African policeman had stopped traffic. As the boy walked towards them, they saw the small, square, brown case that the boy carried in his hand and they knew he was going to kindergarten.

"Let's threaten the pickanin," meaning "young one," Simon suggested, pointing at the schoolboy.

"We cannot do that," argued Josh.

The barefoot man agreed, "They'll throw us in jail."

"In jail, we'll eat," said Simon

"Jail food is not plentiful for a man," stated the man in torn clothes. "And jail clothes are not enough in the cold season."

The wild-eyed apprehensive group advanced slowly, knobkerries in hand. In back of one of the nearby homes, a woman homeowner called a servant's name. Two schoolgirls in green dresses arrived at the crossing and stared at the men as they moved forward towards the terrified, immobile boy. The policeman, in a short-sleeve khaki shirt, khaki shorts, long khaki socks and brown highly-polished shoes, strode with a smooth wooden baton in hand, from the crossing towards the slow walking group.

The clear-skinned boy stood looking through his fingers.

The policeman yelled and pointed. "Go back! Get back to the township!"

The men halted, their dusty faces marked with sweat lines.

"There'll be big trouble if you stay here!"

The men's angry, intense, frustrated eyes focused on the policeman and their wide mouths gaped. Simon turned to glance into Josh's eyes to read his thoughts.

The schoolchildren stared with raised eyebrows.

"Go to Satan!" Simon yelled at the policeman.

Josh turned his back to the policeman and the boy. In a low voice he talked to Simon. The policeman

and the child watched Simon hesitate; then turn to walk away from them, followed by his band.

Now the policeman returned to where children waited to cross the street, while the boy ran to school.

As Simon, Josh and their friends walked into the African township, they saw blue and gray smoke curl up from the inhabitants' cooking fires. Newspaper, cans and broken bottles lay in the dirt roads.

The smell of boiling mealie meal reminded Josh of the village where his and Simon's wives and children grew crops and raised chickens. He thought, I miss the simple life of our home. But I know the fertile land of our village has weakened and often rain is short. The promise of the city draws me to it; the pay is good for the lucky people with jobs.

Simon turned to Josh. "Many will want to join us."

"What? To do what?"

"To force shop owners in the township to give us food."

"Yebo," agreed the barefoot man.

Through the familiar streets with no street names signposted, the friends found their way towards a beer hall, not yet opened, where they sat on a wooden bench. They watched Simon go to talk to men who stood nearby. And the men sensed a magnetizing power within Simon as they listened while nodding their heads in agreement.

They followed Simon and his friends to an area behind the beer hall, where they stood silently in a semi-circle and waited. Tired, desperate eyes looked at Simon as he examined each man.

"My brothers. Jobs have not found us."

"Yebo, yebo," people agreed.

Simon added, "And we are many."

"We do not go well," stated a young man with large ears, frowning as he stood with his hands in his trouser pockets and his shirt hanging out.

A man with a black mustache added, "The pain of hunger is with us."

"Food comes to the Whites!" said a wild-eyed man, who stood with hands on hips and wore khaki pants and a stained, white, sleeveless undershirt.

"It does. We know the police protect the Whites," Simon said.

The young man raised his bare arms and open hands. "What can we do?"

A young mother, with a sleeping baby wrapped in a thin yellow blanket on her back, walked close to the agitated group, staring at the men as she slowed. Simon paused until she had passed.

“The time to choose a way has come. We must go to shops in the township.”

The young man objected, “Without money, they send us away.”

Simon raised his voice. “Then force will come to them!”

Josh warned, “Not so loud.”

At this moment Simon knew, as he looked into the men’s intense eyes, that many were ready to be led. “We start with the shop on the corner.”

“That’s madala’s business,” explained a thin man with hands folded across his chest, referring to “old man.”

“He has meat pies and sausage rolls,” said Josh.

Simon said, “Those who want to eat... follow me.”

Some people did not join Simon, preferring to watch from a distance. One elderly man wandered away muttering to himself. He turned nonchalantly on to a side street, and when out of sight, walked fast to the nearest police sub-station a mile away.

Simon led a group of twenty men who strode to the corner store where madala, with gray hair receding from a wide forehead, stood alone in a cramped area behind a worn wooden counter.

Madala greeted the crowd. “Good morning.”

“Good morning, madala,” Simon greeted with the respectful salutation.

“What do so many of you want, today?”

“Our stomachs are complaining.”

“Fresh white bread has come from the bakery this morning.”

Hot, humid air filled the small shop, as the men pressed close. Simon looked at his followers’ tight faces and asked, “Has money come to anyone’s hand?”

Beads of perspiration grew on the men’s faces and sweat trickled from their armpits while they stared at Simon and then at madala, who said slowly in a quivering voice, “If you don’t pay, I have no money to buy food for the store tomorrow.”

Josh declared, “You charge more than the stores in town.”

“I cannot sell at the prices in town and keep the shop open.”

“We know you have money in the bank,” Josh replied.

“Rent for the shop is owed. And many relatives came to stay with me,” he said searching for a sympathetic face.

Simon responded, “Madala, are you refusing us?”

"Here, take this!"

Simon said, "What? Two loaves of white bread! Our hunger will not be satisfied with that."

"No more."

Simon raised his knobkerrie and madala shielded his head with his arm, but that only weakened the blow. Screaming, madala fell to the floor, with blood running down his head and splashing on his gray shirt.

"Take everything," ordered Simon.

The men grabbed food, passed it back to those who could not reach, and emptied the shelves into arms and bulging pockets.

"Bring madala outside," Simon ordered. "We burn his store and show we will not be stopped."

"No, no," the bleeding man cried as they pushed him outside. Tears of pain and shock fell from his eyes.

"Empty that kerosene tin onto the shelves," Simon commanded. He struck a match on the side of a matchbox, lit the fuel, then ran outside as the flames leapt high and grew.

Other men asked for a share of the stolen food. They received small portions that only teased their rumbling stomachs.

"Come with us," Simon called, waving his arm to a larger group.

In many small township stores, shopkeepers heard warnings by word of mouth. They hurriedly locked their store doors and fled. But the locked doors did not stop the looting and burning.

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The elderly man arrived a block away from the police sub-station, then stopped to look around him and check if he was being watched. Walking to the back door of the sub-station, he opened it, stepped into an office where a detective sat and closed the office door.

"I have information."

"Sit down," said the African detective and pointed to the one empty, plain wooden chair that stood in front of his small desk, then readied a short pencil and notebook and looked up.

"A man was talking violence."

"What does he look like?"

"A big man, wearing a dark blue shirt and gray trousers. He has a scar on his right cheek. He leads a gang to make trouble."

“What did he say? How many people in his gang? Which direction did they go?”

The detective’s pencil-lead moved across the lined, white paper as he took detailed notes. When satisfied with the answers to his questions, he unlocked a small safe on the floor and handed the informer ten shillings in coins. The informer thanked him, pocketed the money and quickly exited the room. The detective called the main police station from a black telephone on his desk.

At the same time, news of the fires and looting was arriving at headquarters from many sources. Sirens of armored vehicles, fire engines and ambulances screamed as the vehicles sped towards the thick, black smoke and the looters, who scattered as the warning sounds drew near.

“Josh, come to my place later,” Simon called as he ran with canned food and bottled drinks in his arms.

Josh raced to his room, locked the door and hid his booty under the bed. Amid cries of children and wails of mothers, he listened with a loud beating heart to the shouts of policemen and firemen. As he lay on his bed and waited he moaned to himself, “Please, please... no-one knock on my door.”

The people of the township watched the firefighters and answered the policemen’s questions. After two hours, sounds of vehicles driven away brought Josh to his door. Opening it cautiously a few inches, he saw African and European police depart and township people congregate in small groups in the street. He stepped outside, locked his door and turned towards the street where Simon lived. As he drew close, he saw through the open back door of a gray police van, handcuffed morose men sitting on wooden benches facing each other, and four African policemen surrounding Simon outside his room.

Josh staggered when he saw guns and batons and heard policemen’s shouts. He stared as Simon was roughly handcuffed, then shoved into the van. As the vehicle was driven away, he saw Simon’s intense, belligerent eyes peering through vertical bars covering a small window on the side of the van.

Josh looked through bitter tears at the receding vehicle then kicked the dust in anger as he walked away.

Charged with assault, destruction of property and looting, Simon and the other men were crowded into stinking, windowless cells in the Bulawayo jail. High walls, topped with multi-colored broken glass, enclosed the jail and guards armed with rifles stood outside the walls on two diagonally opposite corners.

Simon sat on the cell floor in his cream colored, inmate’s coarse shirt and shorts and thought, Like ripening fruit, heavy and ready to fall, looting cannot be stopped when there is hunger.

Three months later, Simon stood barefoot and handcuffed, facing a European judge in a black gown and white wig with side curls. The judge listened to the charge, asked for Simon’s response and only heard

silence. Then the judge ordered, "Four years with hard labor!"

During the following months and years, jails became crowded with sullen men, as riots continued. Simon dreamed of the day he would be free to walk out of jail. He conformed to the rules of his jailers and avoided fights with prisoners. He secretly talked with an inmate who knew about camps outside the country, where men and women recruits trained to fight against the government with guns, grenades and mines supplied by China.

After completion of his jail term, Simon contacted a member of the Zimbabwe African People's Union in the African township, who provided him with money. Then Simon rode in a third class railcar of a steam-engine train to Victoria Falls. On the outskirts of the small, quiet, tourist-oriented Victoria Falls town he hired a pirate taxi. They travelled along a lonely, flat, winding road towards the border town of Kasane in Botswana.

The taxi driver stopped in a game reserve near the Kazungula Ferry crossing, wished Simon "Good luck" and directed him towards a secluded location at the edge of the Zambezi River. The dry-season water lay shallow, enabling Simon to wade at dusk across the wide river into Zambia. He followed detailed, memorized instructions to find a bustling guerilla training camp.

Three years later, Simon and twenty armed men and women crossed the Zambia border at night in canoes, to return to their homeland and join the civil war.

Following eight years of hostilities, leaders agreed to a peace settlement, and to hold elections where every adult could vote. A new Prime Minister was elected in the country renamed Zimbabwe.

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After 25 years, when the wrinkles in Simon and Josh's faces had grown long and deep, and many teeth had fallen, they returned to their village to live for the remainder of their lives with their wives, children and grandchildren. On a hot, dry summer day, they decided to get respite from the familiar village and its people. They walked without shoes to a huge, sacred baobab tree a mile from the village that was believed to be over 2,000 years old. They sat in the shade of this "monkey bread" tree and drank a lemonade-tasting mixture of water and dried pulp from baobab tree fruit.

The companions sat in comfortable, familiar silence. Josh looked at Simon's distant expression. "What thoughts are with you today, my friend?"

"The war of liberation from the White government."

Josh added, "We won, but that caused much suffering."

Simon thought, Death came to thousands of people. Many are trying to live without legs or arms. He said, "Evil spirits often come to me."

"Ow! Ow! What do these evil spirits say, Simon?"

"They show raping and torture that came to many in the war."

"I'm sorry my friend."

They listened to the sounds of bush life – the recognizable, calming music of birds singing and crickets chirping, and the deep moo of cows as they were herded by young village boys. They watched a dung beetle as it rolled a ball of dung with its hind legs, lay eggs in it, then bury the ball. Their tired eyes roamed over dry grass to the many conical white ant mounds where termite-worlds grew upward from the ground.

Josh enjoyed asking Simon questions, even though he knew the answers.

"What did you do for food while you were fighting, Simon?"

"Some food was given to us by our command center. Sometimes we took villagers' chickens and corn and burnt their huts after we accused them of cooperation with government forces... even if we did not suspect them. Villagers cried when they saw their homes destroyed and their food taken. These things gave me a bad feeling."

"Evil visits us all, Simon."

Simon and Josh looked at the parched grass and scattered trees and Simon tried to stop the shaking of his hands and twitching of his right eye.

Simon said, "Boredom stayed with the fighters for many days, while we were waiting for action."

"Yes."

Simon continued, "The leaders had many talks on their differences before they agreed to end the war. And I hoped the promise of good chances would reach us."

"The leaders promised 'One man – one vote.'"

"Now all men and women can vote, Josh, but you know what happens if we attend a rally by the opposition party. We are beaten and driven out by police."

Josh nodded in agreement. "How could we know what Zimbabwe independence would bring?"

"Oh Josh, Josh... my old friend... after the war, we lived the nightmare of soldiers crushing uprisings in Matabeleland. Our leaders will not admit that what they did... it was horrible; more than 20,000 murdered... and thousands suffered in torture camps."

"Yes."

Simon looked up at the branches of the baobab tree. "Our ancestors once sat under this magnificent tree. You know, it is sometimes called the 'upside down' tree, because its branches look like roots. This tree is like life – things look upside down to me."

Josh clapped his hands softly. "Ha, ha, ha. Simon, you are right. Many things are upside down. Ha, ha, ha, ha..."

"It's good to hear you laugh Josh, my friend."

"Laughter heals my heart."

"I wish I could laugh with you. But I am sick with hopelessness of a better life."

"Things will come right."

"Josh, Josh... may our good sangoma hear your words," said Simon referring to the medicine man. "I am afraid of the coldness of government leaders. They don't care about us."

"No, they do not."

Josh picked up brown sand and let it run through his fingers. They watched a young man ride his bicycle on a narrow, winding footpath towards the neighboring village, with fat, brown, squawking hens crammed into a homemade cage on the back of the bicycle. He pedaled through areas where packs of spotted hyenas hunted at night and cried with maniacal laughter.

"Josh, you know our problems; no police protection, bribery of officials, stealing of foreign aid supplies, spreading of hunger and disease..."

Josh added, "And fat bank accounts overseas for our leaders... Much food swells their bellies.... and their families' bellies."

"And many other countries are welcoming our skilled people. The jobs Whites gave us have gone to other countries with them."

"This is true."

"We have little food. And what happens in our country, Josh?"

"What?"

"Large farms are taken by the government, mostly from White owners and given to liberation fighters and others. These people cannot make the amount of food the large farmers could. Weakness comes to the overused land of many small farmers. Electricity and phones are failing and promises of indoor plumbing have not arrived."

"The truth is hard to hear."

"The truth, Josh, is difficult to recognize. Truth is like the trunk of a baobab tree; one person's arms

cannot embrace it.”

“Yes, Simon.”

“But we know some truth. Once a comrade minister gets too powerful, comrade Prime Minister removes that person’s power. We have no foreign currency for medical supplies. When we get a new ambulance, we have no petrol and it has to be pulled by oxen.”

“People in other countries are laughing at our oxen driven ambulance.”

“Josh, how long can we remain quiet and patient? We are not healing, and immorality and disrespect are festering in our wounds. Pain and ruin comes to us through our political butchers. This is what generations to come will inherit.”

“Simon, Simon. Please, don’t be hopeless. Come, let us go to sangoma and ask for his wisdom.”

“Yes, Josh. Let’s see if he can help.”

While walking towards sangoma’s home, separated from the cluster of village huts, they hunted and found chicken eggs laid in the grass. With eggs in hand, they approached the open entrance of a conical, straw, thatched roof hut of an aged man who sat in the cool, dark interior.

“Greetings, sangoma,” Josh called from outside the open entrance.

Simon peered into the darkness and called, “O sangoma, we have come to seek your help.”

A deep, low voice responded, “Welcome. Come in and sit down.”

Simon and Josh crept into the darkness and sat on buck skins, laid on the compacted floor opposite sangoma, who sat with his eyes closed in a deep-wrinkled face, nodding his balding head forward and back. Simon and Josh waited without speaking, breathing the smell of herbs and smoke from a fire gone cold.

Sangoma sat still and opened his intense heavy-lidded eyes. “How may I help you, my brothers?”

Josh said, “We have brought you a gift of eggs, sangoma.”

“You are generous.”

“Trouble has come to our people, sangoma,” Simon asserted.

“Yebo, my brother.”

Josh said, “We ask you to communicate with the ancestors’ spirits and tell us what may come in future.”

Sangoma sat stooped, staring vacantly into the distance, then looked at Simon and Josh, before answering.

“Pain has reached the spirits. They see much future misery.”

“Ow! Ow! Ow!” Josh and Simon cried in unison.

They sat in silence, staring at the ashes of the fire.

“Let us drink some tea, and I will try to communicate again with our ancestors.”

Sangoma poured cool, brewed tea into chipped enamel mugs for his guests and himself. They drank together and sat quietly.

Then sangoma closed his eyes, and after a few minutes, entered a trance, while Simon and Josh stared at him and each other, afraid to move or speak.

Many minutes passed before sangoma opened his eyes, moaned and muttered in a low voice, “Hope is hard to find.”

At this moment, he threw dry bones on the floor in front of him, examined them and Josh and Simon saw a small smile come to his broad lips.

“I see that following many, many rainy seasons, a generation will come. They will realize the bad ways of their forefathers and they will change the lives of our people. Wisdom and respect will reach the leaders.”

“Ah... that is good news, sangoma,” Simon responded. “I am grateful. Now, I am pleased.”

Josh added, “Thank you, sangoma.”

“My brothers, I tell what I foresee. Be at peace and go well.”

Simon and Josh walked out of sangoma’s hut. Strolling away from sangoma’s home, they visualized a land of the future, with lakes full of fresh water and fish, trees heavy with sweet ripe fruit, fat cattle grazing on tall green grass, and people with sufficient food in their stomachs.

And the two men knew contentment as they walked back to their huts, along a thin sandy path.

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