

## **Ian Burgess-Simpson**

# **PETRUS**

James inhaled and shook his head from side to side, blowing smoke from his nostrils. The smoke shone in the early afternoon sunlight that came in through a hole in the corrugated iron roof. Perched up on the scarred benchtop that ran the length of the workshop I waited with the Learner Driver's book face down on my knees, knowing by the way that James knotted his eyebrows and peered at the end of his nose that he was thinking. His face lifted and the deep nostrils pointed at me.

"Ian; you see me, when I take my test for the drivers' long, long, long time ago — 1946, yes! That time was a hard thing. That other white man, Mr Geldenhuis, I'm working with him then in the Transvaal, he's giving me plenty plenty books, thick books Ian, for to learn that thing. But I pass the exam!"

"Yes?" I replied, not wanting to indulge his memory any further. He could talk all day. I slid down off the bench, turned my back on James and looked around the workshop. Johannes had one foot up on an empty paint tin. He was carefully rubbing polish into the toe of his boot with an old cloth. The laces were out and the leather sagged around his ankle, showing a bright tartan sock. Captain sat on a box a few feet away next to a pile of fittings, his greasy hat crumpled on Petrus' stool behind him. He held a broken hacksaw blade against the thread of a fitting, both hands motionless, his watery old eyes staring at some spot on the wall. He wrinkled up his jaws, turned his head and spat loudly into the corner. We all knew that James couldn't read.

Through the open end of the workshop I saw Engineer come crunching across the gravel from the prefabricated office baking in its bare patch of sun. He always walked so slowly, with his large shoulders rounded and bent forward and his arms dangling. It annoyed me. He came into the middle of the workshop, removed his overalls, clucked at an oil stain on one sleeve and folded them with precision into a plastic carry bag. Tossing the fitting back on the pile Captain creaked into a standing position. Johannes finished the neat bow of his bootlace and stamped his foot with satisfaction; Engineer gave an emphatic nod, "O.K. — time to go."

We followed him down past the office to the truck parked in the loading yard. Moses shuffled out from behind a pile of broken bricks and James yelled at him to go and fetch the picks and shovels, then

climbed into the truck and started it. Above the revving of the engine I heard Shorty shout something to his wife and soon he came up from his mud house that stood behind the clump of Japanese bamboo. He wore only overalls, rolled up in bunches at the wrists and ankles. There wasn't a size to fit Shorty. "Come on Mr Shorty", James shouted out of the window. Shorty grinned through the gaps in his teeth, "O.K. Old Man, don't worry."

Moses sauntered back from the workshop dragging a few picks and shovels which he flung onto the back of the truck. Captain muttered a curse at him as he climbed up, and the truck jolted out of the yard and up the long hill towards Petrus.

I thought back to last year, before I had started working. Every morning after we'd had breakfast and I had fed the dogs, when Emma the house servant was having her tea on the back porch, Petrus would come slowly up the garden, trying to pat the dogs as they yapped at him. He never gave up trying to befriend them. Sprachet, a little one-eyed mongrel, hated and attacked him passionately, but she was old and so toothless that she couldn't harm him. Petrus would stand at the open back door with dew on his two-tone shoes and the bottoms of his trousers rolled and damp around his thin ankles. The dogs would crouch a little way off, watching him and occasionally growling.

"Morning missus", he'd call, his voice dry and rattling from tuberculosis. My mother, who was also dying, would go through to the kitchen and chat with him while she mixed his bovril with hot water in an old tin mug. His skin was loose and although he always wore long sleeves and buttoned his shirt up to the neck, one could see that his bones were growing brittle. But his eyes never changed; bloodshot and intense they shifted and searched and blinked. James told me once that all the men used to be afraid of Petrus, because he was such a "terrible man with the knife". I'd seen Petrus and James fight every year at the Christmas party, sodden with brandy, flailing at each other until they collapsed asleep in the bright sun and the others turned back to the meat roasting on the open fire.

Old before their time, almost equal, they both brightened in a few minutes with Petrus telling my mother about his sister and his house and exclaiming at the bits of news she had. When he'd finished his bovril Petrus would walk very slowly back down to the yard and spend the day supervising Captain in small jobs or in tidying up a forgotten corner of the workshop.

A few weeks ago Petrus had gone to hospital and it was a relief not to have to listen to his voice rasping out of his thin chest as he wandered around after Captain.

The road became worse through the outskirts of the illegal shanty town, Madonza, cutting between the dusty mud and tin shacks with dusty old men in shirt-sleeves sitting outside staring at each other across the rubbish and potholes. Beyond that it was barely a track. From the top of a rise where the twisted guava trees petered out a single mud hut was visible a mile or so away. Here the bush was open grass, growing coarse out of the hard ground. The picks and shovels clattered in the back of the truck.

We stopped ten feet away from the hut, the engine cut out and the silence hummed. A chicken pecked its way across the packed dirt outside the hut and a woman wrapped in bright print material came out from the cool dark door. The men mumbled a greeting.

Relieved at the noise we made, we tumbled out of the truck. James and Engineer started arguing about the position of the hole while Captain found a rock and sat down to roll a brown paper cigarette, sniffing with concentration. The rest of us waited, leaning on picks and shovels or squatting against the side of the truck. The sun burnt into the top of my head. Having reached a decision, James and Engineer had Moses mark out the corners of the hole with four small rocks and then Shorty and I started digging.

The pick handle was rough as it slid through my hands, dust trickled from the point onto my neck and down my back and stuck to the sweat. The other men were quiet while we dug the hole, 4 foot by 7 foot, for Petrus. The thud, thud of the picks hung in the warm air. My whole body itched with the dust.

It took an hour to finish, and the air grew hotter and more humid as clouds tumbled against the skyline, piling up shadows across the valley. A utility came over the hill and headed towards us under the darkening sky. It was my father. He parked next to the truck and walked around the hole, chewing on his pipe; "Finished?" Engineer nodded, "Yes Sir, we finished."

Standing to one side of the hole we watched the hut and soon the woman came out accompanied by a man in a white homemade robe, tied at the waist with a bright strip of blue cloth. His feet were bare. In one hand he held a long stick, bent like a shepherd's staff. He made a small bow, and Engineer took off his shoes and followed the man into the hut. Each man went in turn while we waited restlessly with lowered heads. Shorty nudged me. The hut was gloomy, lit only by a candle stub. Against the wall was a plain coffin, beside it the priest cried a soft chant in Siswati. As I stepped up to the box I was startled by the woman's eyes shining at me from the corner behind the priest. Petrus lay in the box dressed in his best clothes and the two-tone shoes. His

possessions were placed at his side; a large brass-studded pocket knife, a throwing stick, some trinkets. He was staring right at me. As I came out the chicken passed by the door and went under my feet. It gave a harsh scream and waddled away, clucking. I heard Engineer say to my father: "No Sir, you don't have to take the shoes off", but my father did and went in.

After that Moses and Shorty fetched the coffin and fumbled it into the hole. The priest began to chant again and we all went for the shovels; I wasn't quick enough and stood empty handed listening to the thump and swish of soil on the coffin. The chant swelled with the rumble of the clouds and the spat of rain on the dust until the priest threw back his head and called out in a long wail, "Umkulunkulu!"; the Siswati for God. As the call faded the men softly repeated it. Then the shovelling became frantic and the rain came down. Everyone was talking and giving orders. Captain swore at Moses and took the shovel away from him, grunting and heaving at the soil. The rain mingled with the sweat and soaked his face. It was nearly dark.

When the hole was filled and firmly stamped down Johannes grinned and said "Alleluja Amen, Al!" As we drove off the woman gave a small wave from the door of the hut. The earth on the grave was turning to mud. Near Madonza Moses asked Captain for some tobacco and Captain nearly pushed him right out of the truck. We all laughed. Moses dug a battered peach out of his pocket and started eating it noisily, the juice running down his chin.

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