



Crouched on a branch of a *mukuyu* tree, a girl tore open a speckled fruit. She grimaced as ants scurried over her fingers. So many! And the inside was full of worms, too.

Even Nhamo, hungry as she was, couldn't eat it. She dropped it to the ground and searched for another cluster of figs.

"Nhamo! Nhamo!" came a voice not far away. The girl rested her head against the trunk of the tree. If she was quiet, no one would find her. The thick, green leaves formed a bowl around her.

"Nhamo! You lazy girl! It's your turn to pound the mealies," called the voice. Footsteps trudged along the path below.

It's always my turn, thought Nhamo. She watched Aunt Chipo disappear behind some bushes. She much preferred to sit in the shade and gather figs. Almost without thinking, she observed the dusty path below: Aunt Chipo's footprints were short and wide, with the little toe tucked under. Nhamo could recognize the footprints of everyone in the village.

Nhamo didn't know why she had learned this. It was simply a way to calm her spirit. Her body worked all day planting, weeding, baby-sitting, washing—oh, so many chores!—but her spirit had nothing to do. It became restless, and so she gave it work, too.

It learned how the Matabele ants carried their

young at the center of a line while the soldiers ran along the outside. It learned that when Uncle Kufa pursed his lips as he was eating, he was angry at Aunt Chipo. It learned that the wind smelled one way when it blew from the stream and another when it came from the forest.

Nhamo's spirit had to be kept very busy to keep her from losing her temper.

The other girls in the village never felt restless. Nhamo was like a pot of boiling water. "I want . . . I want . . .," she whispered to herself, but she didn't know what she wanted and so she had no idea how to find it.

"Nhamo!" bellowed Aunt Chipo from directly under the *mukuyu* tree. "Selfish, disobedient child! I know you're up there. I can see fresh fig skins on the ground!"

Then she had to come down. Aunt Chipo switched her across the legs with a stick before dragging her back to the village.

Nhamo went to the *hozi*, the communal storehouse, to fetch mealies. The *hozi* was up on poles, and in the shade beneath was Masvita, Aunt Chipo's oldest daughter. She was making a pot from wet clay. Nhamo squatted beside her.

"That's beautiful," she commented.

Masvita grinned. "The last one fell apart when it was baked. I've been working on this one all day."

"It's so nice! I'm sure it will be all right." Nhamo stuck her finger into the reserve clay and tasted it. "Mmm! Termite nest!"

"It's good, isn't it?" Masvita licked some of the clay off her fingers.

"Nhamo!" shouted Aunt Chipo from her doorway.

Nhamo climbed into the *hozi* and selected a basket of mealie grains. She hauled it back to the kitchen hut and poured the grains into a mortar made from a tree trunk. *Stamp, stamp, stamp!* She pounded the mealies with a long pole until the tough outer husks came loose. It was extremely hard work. The sweat ran down into her eyes. She had to stop and retie her dress-cloth from time to time.

She rested her skinny arms whenever she dared and

watched Masvita in the cool shade of the *hozi*. Her cousin wasn't exactly idle, but she was never given the really difficult tasks. If a heavy pot of boiling porridge had to be lifted from the fire, Nhamo was told to do it.

Once, when she was smaller, she had dropped a pot. The scalding porridge spilled over her feet. She screamed. The other villagers ran to help her. They blew on her skin, but in spite of their care Nhamo's feet had blistered and scarred. "Such a shame!" cried Grandmother. Aunt Chipo only remarked, "Yes, but think if it had happened to Masvita!"

*Stamp, stamp, stamp!* Nhamo watched her cousin in the shade of the *hozi*. She was beautiful, no question about it. Nhamo had seen her own face reflected in a pool. She thought she didn't look too bad. Masvita was sweet-tempered, though, and Nhamo had to admit her own manners left a lot to be desired.

But who wouldn't be sweet-tempered if she could sit in the shade all day?

When the husks were loosened, Nhamo poured the grain into a winnowing basket. She tossed it repeatedly until the breeze blew the chaff away. She put the crushed maize into a clay pot with water to soak overnight. She would dry and grind it into flour tomorrow.

Then Aunt Chipo sent her to fetch water from the stream. Nhamo filled the cooking pots and watered the pumpkin mounds. She weeded the fields carefully with her hoe—*chop, chop, chop*. Next, she collected fresh cow dung for her grandmother's floor.

Grandmother sat in the shade outside her hut and puffed on a clay pipe. It wasn't a nice habit for a woman, but no one dreamed of telling her so. *Ambuya* was old, so old! She was close to the spirit world, and everyone respected her for it. "Welcome, Little Pumpkin," she called as Nhamo arrived.

Nhamo swept the floor with a bundle of grass and rubbed the dung in with her hands. "If only we lived when Mwari's voice was still heard," sighed Grandmother. "In those days, when people clapped their hands and asked God for food, pots of porridge and honeycombs came out of the earth."